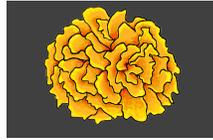


Find your Marigolds: The One Essential Rule

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Welcome to a year on swim team. This year will test you more intensely than just about anything you've done up to now. It will deplete all your energy, bring you to tears, and make you question every talent or skill you thought you had. But all these tests, if you approach them the right way, will leave you better and stronger than you are today.

Advice is available everywhere you look, and some of it is very good. Still, with everything you have to do right now, it's easy to get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of it all. And the fact is, a lot of those tips won't work very well if you fail to follow this one essential rule:

Surround yourself with good people.

By finding the positive, supportive, energetic teammates on your team and sticking close to them, you can improve your swimming satisfaction more than with any other strategy. And your chances of excelling in this sport will skyrocket. Just like a young seedling growing in a garden, thriving this year depends partially on who you plant yourself next to.

The Marigold Effect

Many experienced gardeners follow a concept called companion planting: placing certain vegetables and plants near each other to improve growth for one or both plants. For example, rose growers plant garlic near their roses because it repels bugs and prevents fungal diseases. Among companion plants, the marigold is one of the best: It protects a wide variety of plants from pests and harmful weeds. If you plant a marigold beside most any garden vegetable, that vegetable will grow big and strong and healthy, protected and encouraged by its marigold.

Marigolds exist on our team as well – encouraging, supporting and nurturing their teammates along the journey. If you can find at least one marigold on your team and stay close to them, you will grow. Find more than one and you will positively thrive!

You will have to seek them out. You can identify them by the way they congratulate you on arrival. Or by the way their offers to help sound sincere. Or just by how you feel when you're with them: Are you calmer, more hopeful? Excited to get started on a tough set? Comfortable asking questions, even the stupid ones? If you feel good around this person, chances are they have some marigold qualities.

Once you've identified your marigolds, make an effort to spend time with them. Having a tough practice? Swim next to your marigolds. Not understanding how to break a bad habit? Go to your marigolds. Frustrated by your meet performance? Marigolds. Make the effort. It's worth the trouble.

Beware the Walnut Trees

While seeking out your marigolds, you'll need to take note of the walnut trees. Successful gardeners avoid planting vegetables anywhere near walnut trees, which give off a toxic substance that can inhibit growth, wilt, and ultimately kill nearby vegetable plants. And sadly, if your team is like most, walnut trees exist too. They may not seem dangerous at first. In fact, some may appear to be good teammates – happy, social, well-organized. But here are some signs that you should keep your distance: Their take on the team is negative. Their take on the coach is negative. Being around them makes you feel insecure, discouraged, overwhelmed, or embarrassed.

Avoid their negativity whenever you can.

Doing this may be a challenge: Touching base with your marigolds will help flush out the toxins that build up from contact with the walnut trees.

So in the spirit of identification, here are some common walnut tree varieties to look out for:

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Team-Hatin' Kate, who will snort every time you share a positive anecdote about your program. Spend enough time with her and you'll believe every teammate is a lying, cheating little sneak and you're a fool if you think otherwise.

"Over-It" Dan, who regularly reports on how many years he has left before he's "outta here." He then adds with a chuckle that you have about five, right? Dan will find your enthusiasm about swimming "cute," but will then tell you to "just wait...it'll wear off."

Triple-A Tina, who sets high standards for herself and her teammates, and brags when other teammates fail. You just qualified for Sectionals? Tina will remind you she made her first cut 2 months ago. You held 1:02s on that last round? Tina will point out she dropped down to 1:00 on the last 100. After talking to Tina, you'll feel the urge to counter her boasts with put-downs, and you'll start focusing more on others performance than on your own.

Badass Bobby, who overhears you talking about how challenging it is to balance swimming and school and says, "I never have trouble with that. I sleep 4 hours a night, swim 20 hours a week, and I've never gotten lower than an A-." Whenever you leave a conversation with him, you have a breakdown to your parents in the car.

Hattie-Who-Hates-the-Coach. Self-explanatory.

My-Time Margaret, who constantly asks "how many minutes do we have left in workout?" She complains about the number of hours she spends swimming each week, and is out the door the second practice ends without ever offering to help pull covers or lane lines.

And Good-Old-Days Judy, who hates anything new and never fails to mention how much better things used to be.

Be especially vigilant during the most challenging parts of your season, when you'll find yourself in a veritable forest of walnut trees. It can be the worst when you are days out from a big meet and the coach asks the group to perform in practice – race a 75 off the blocks for example – in groups. The trees will slowly turn toward the center, leaves rustling, snarky comments dropping off their branches like walnuts whacking the table.

As soon as they huddle up it will be snark, snark, ugly, ugly, hate, hate. When this happens, recognize that you are surrounded, hold tight to your roots, and remember your marigolds.

Get What You Can, Where You Can

The search for marigolds will yield imperfect results: Not everyone is all-marigold or all-walnut tree. There will be some who just make you happy – go to them for a mood boost. Some who aren't terribly great at racing, but who love the sport to death – seek them out when you need to be reminded of how much you love swimming. Others will take care of you – encourage you to put things into perspective, not beat yourself up. And some who are intensely into the craft, who always have a great strategy on hand and mental focus in training – they can really help you stretch your abilities. Learn who has what marigold qualities and get what you can from each of them.

Finally, try to find some compassion for the walnut trees. Their toxicity comes from a place of real pain, and they themselves probably fell under the influence of the walnut trees who came before them.

Competitive swimming is a challenging sport, and a long-term commitment – like climbing Mount Everest (if you'll allow for one last metaphor). You're aware of the difficulty and you have accepted the challenge. Before you climb that peak, you'll need to choose a sherpa to escort you through the trek.

The first option is "Walter Nutt," who starts by asking why in the world you'd want to do something like this. He describes the many others who have died trying to do this climb, how sick you'll get, how people have polluted the trail, all but destroying what was once a pristine and beautiful mountain.

The second option, "Mary Gold," congratulates you on your courage, sits down with you to map out some important strategies, and finishes off by saying, "It's a crazy-hard, mammoth task, but you know what? We're going to kick that mountain's butt."

Who do you want leading you up that peak? Find your marigolds and stick close to them. Grow big and strong. Kick that mountain's butt.

